

# Dele Ojo... unforgettable voice of the Independence era

By Benson Idonije

Juju music took on a conventional highlife format upon Independence in 1960 in a trend that was influenced by the dance band style of Emmanuel Tetteh Mensah, E.C. Arinze, Victor Olaiya, Roy Chicago among others. The late Isiah Kehinde Dairo was perhaps, the first to be initiated with his ten man Blue Sports Band. Along came Orlando Owoh, teacher at the time, of the Omimah Band. But perhaps the artiste that helped to give authenticity to Dairo's innovation was Dele Ojo, a dynamic young singer, guitarist, composer whose popularity immediately cut across because of his unique approach.

Dairo's music though highlife-oriented still had its roots in the traditional juju format of his predecessors such as, Tunde Nightingale, Ojoge Dandiel and others. This influence was more noticeable at the rhythm section level. Orlando Owoh for his own part, retained a few of these percussion instruments but placed much emphasis on congas.

Dele Ojo however, patterned his entire line-up on the big band style of prevailing highlife, using as many as three guitars to accomplish his style. The trap drums was there to deliver the highlife rhythmic effect, but what was absent was the line-up of horns which characterised the front-line section of highlife aggregation at the time in terms of trumpets, saxophones, and trombones.

Dele Ojo however, boosted his ensemble sound with the assembly of singers who either provided appropriate responses to his lead vocals or created extended group vocal harmonies which were well orchestrated.

As lead guitarist, he created palm wine sounds that were in the idiom of big band highlife, and but for the absence of horns, the sound identity was highlife.

Dele's popularity soon flourished and was in great demand across Nigeria in 1963 up till the end of that decade, with a double advantage. He easily passed for a highlife band as well as juju music outfit, and was often engaged by clients who required both sound identities, even though, highlife gave him a more national acclaim.

Another strong point in his favour was the fact that as a highlife-oriented Juju band, he sang both in Yoruba and English. And because he started out as a teacher before veering into the music profession, the English versions of his highlife were articulately done, among them, I don't know why she loves me. Bouncing Bona and Chritiana which also made hits as singles on Phillips Recording label His music was enjoyed across the length and breath of Nigeria and abroad.

He was invited on a tour of Britain before the end of the decade of the sixties. And there he had many shows lined up for him. He did not only thrill Nigerian communities in Great Britain, he also endeared himself to Britons and other foreigners who hailed him as the king of highlife.

Upon his return from his first English tour, he made the hit record, *Ilu Oyinbo dara* in which he extolled the virtues of England in terms of life and living. But one of the benefits of this hit record was Dele's revelation of the hardships that Nigerian students suffered in England as the time. The information was quite useful to parents whose children were in London as well as those who were yet to send their wards abroad.

Dele also made a first tour of the United States of America which was very successful. The second tour which took him round more states of America was even more rewarding in that bookings now came from American entertainment agents who exposed him to the international scene.

This incredible success lured him back to America where he decided to stay for many years playing and making hit records. But by the time he came home in the seventies to settle down, the music scene had changed. Juju music had taken over from highlife, and Ebenezer Obey and Sunny Ade were now dominating the scene. Besides, while in America, some of his boys who became home-sick deserted him. He therefore found it difficult to regroup as soon as he got back. And when he eventually did, he could not achieve the same artistic results from the new replacement.

Actually, the odds against him were not just many, they were overwhelming. Highlife was essentially a night club type of music; and before he travelled he played at Ibadan and Lagos at certain designated clubs which his fans found suitable in terms of comfort and location. All that was no more as the patterns had now changed with the ascendancy of Juju music and at venues of the choice of the hirers. And to make matters worse, his music no longer appealed to his fans whose musical-cultural perception had now altered in sympathy with changing trends, with a natural preference for Ebenezer Obey and Sonny Ade whose music was now taking on all the elements of urban social music.

Fusing highlife and juju with their own individual approaches, the music was executed with modern instruments which passed through high voltage amplification to make dancing irresistible.

When Dele eventually got his sound identity right with the recruitment of new musicians, he figured that what he was losing from the absence of live engagements he could gain from studio recording whose sales had profited him enormously in the past. He then recorded an album titled *Gele Odun* which did not do well in the market. He miscalculated. He was wrong.

However, Dele Ojo and His Star Brothers Band played highlife at its best; and will continue

to be remembered for the role they played in the development of highlife in the early years of Nigerian independence in the sixties.

Born in 1940 at Ilara-Akure in Ondo State, Dele showed keen interest in music from elementary school, leading the school band at age 15. He became a school teacher in 1959 but because of his love for music, he came to Lagos and joined the Victor Olaiya's All Stars Band as a trumpet player. He also sang and played guitar for his artistic development. This experience however, paid off when the second set for which he played trumpet disbanded, rendering him jobless. He immediately took advantage of the popularity of the juju music to form a band with his highlife background.

In these days of re-issues where old works are suddenly coming into the limelight. Dele Ojo's wide and extensive repertoire would be well received. He started his recording career with Badejo Records owned by Badejo Okusanya, one of the oldest indigenous recording stables in Nigeria. But it was with Phillips Records, an international company that he really did business as a recording artiste.

Aside from I don't know why she loves me. Bouncing Bora and Christiana which he did in English, some of his hit singles include Opon aiye. Eni afe lamo, Aiye soro, Owo, Abanije Enla. To ba raiye je. Iya ni wura, Aiye soro, Iwa lewa. Ori serere fun ini. Dele mbo, Igba Eda, among many others.